

THE EARLY CHURCH'S INCONSEQUENTIAL VIEW OF THE MODE OF BAPTISM

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David Wright explains that the ancient church placed stringent expectations on the baptismal ceremony, remarking, "Primitive Christianity apparently made baptism accessible only to the most serious and committed candidates. It seems as if the early church was more concerned to weed out and deter than to attract and welcome."¹ These scrupulous beliefs about baptism are evident in some of the church's earliest literature, which associated its salvific effects only with a mature faith in Christ. The early writings emphasized the blood of Jesus (*Barn.* 5), repentance (*Herm. Vis.* 3.7), a confession of faith (*Did.* 7.1, 3), and several years of biblical and spiritual instruction prior to the ceremony (*Trad. ap.* 17). These writers believed the baptismal waters had no salvific properties apart from God (*Dial.* 14), and the ceremony was considered a seal and completion of the sanctification process (*Protr.* 11-12; *Paed.* 1.6). Similarly, the early church stressed the appropriate administration of the baptismal rite while contending against the ceremonies of other schismatic groups.²

Recognizing this strong devotion to the proper execution of church ordinances, it would be understandable to conclude that the ancient church was also concerned about the precise mode of baptism as well. The purpose of this article is to examine the extrabiblical evidence from the ancient church to answer which mode of baptism was most common and whether that mode was of any consequence to the early church. However, there is a necessary limit to the scope of this investigation. As H. J. Carpenter remarks, "Few aspects of the life of the Church escaped significant change in the fourth century. In the new conditions of that period, ecclesiastical organization, the formulation of doctrine, the manner of dealing with heresy, and the development of liturgical forms all entered on a new phase."³ Thus, this research will consult only the writings that existed prior to the fourth century.

The initial section of this article will define four ecclesiological terms relating to baptism: partial immersion, affusion, aspersion, and submersion (total immersion). The second section will address the writings of the subapostolic era (AD 70-150), while the third segment will treat writings from the ante-Nicene period (AD 150-300). The final section will then present a practical application of the research for contemporary churches. In the end, the evidence demonstrates that the early church favored immersion practices prior to the fourth century. However, the investigation cannot definitively prove whether that mode of baptism was partial or total immersion. Ultimately, the early church considered the method

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¹ David F. Wright, "The Baptismal Community," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 637 (January 2003): 5.

² See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 380-99.

³ H. J. Carpenter, "Creeds and Baptismal Rites in the First Four Centuries," in *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays*, ed. Everett Ferguson, David M. Scholer, and Paul Corby Finney, vol. 11, *Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 367.

of water baptism inconsequential and focused, instead, on the genuineness of the candidate's faith in Christ.

Baptismal Definitions

There are four primary modes of baptism in early Christian tradition: partial immersion, affusion, aspersion, and submersion.⁴ Partial immersion is the practice of submerging only part of the body in water while having additional liquid poured over the head. This method should not be confused with the discipline of submersion. Affusion is the exercise of pouring water solely over the baptismal candidate's head; it is sometimes referred to as infusion. In contrast to partial immersion, the rest of the candidate's body is not submerged in water. The act of aspersion involves sprinkling the person with liquid using either the hands or a customary object such as leaf stalks. Candidates are not placed in water nor do they have water poured on them. Submersion, on the other hand, is the practice of covering the candidate's entire body with the baptismal waters. Many commentators refer to this method as "full body" or "total immersion."⁵

Subapostolic Writings (AD 70-150)

The writings of the subapostolic era demonstrate that the early fathers favored immersing the catechumen outdoors in running water.⁶ Be that as it may, the writings do not conclusively resolve whether they practiced partial immersion or total submersion most often. The writings of the early church conclude that they regularly accepted affusion as a form of baptism, but it was not the ideal method. The writings also validate that the early church was generally apathetic and indifferent about which particular mode of baptism they practiced.

The Epistle of Barnabas (ca. AD 70-138)⁷

The *Epistle of Barnabas* makes two specific references to the implementation of baptism.

⁴ This report will follow F. L. Cross and Elizabeth Livingstone's distinction between the four modes of baptism, though this article replaces the term "immersion" with the more specific designation "partial immersion." See F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24, 116, 827, 1563.

⁵ The generic term "immersion" is often used to refer to submersion in many resources. In this report, however, the broad designation "immersion" will refer to both "partial" and "total" immersion practices.

⁶ Robert Grant defines the "catechumen" as candidates preparing for the rite of baptism through spiritual instruction and discipline. A "petitioner" or "competent" is a candidate in the final weeks before the actual baptismal ceremony and is synonymous with catechumen. See Robert M. Grant, "Development of the Christian Catechumenate," in *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 41-44, 227-28, 251.

⁷ John Robinson dates *Barnabas* to the reign of Emperor Vespasian between AD 70-79, which would make it one of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament (John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976], 313-19). Similarly, Peter Richardson and Martin Shukster ascribe the document to the reign of Emperor Nerva between AD 96-98 (Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster, "Barnabas, Nerva and The Yavnean Rabbis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 34, no. 1 [April 1983]: 38-41). However, contemporary scholarship favors a date during the reign of Emperor Hadrian between AD 117-138 (see James Carleton Paget, "The Epistle of Barnabas," *Expository Times* 117, no. 11 [August 2006]: 442-43.)

The author described the process, “Blessed are those who, having set their hope on the cross, descended into the water [κατέβησαν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ]” (*Barn.* 11.8; cf. Acts 8:36).⁸ He further states, “While we descend into the water [καταβαίνομεν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ] laden with sins and dirt, we rise up [ἀναβαίνω] bearing fruit in our heart” (11.11). Everett Ferguson contends that these two portions clearly indicate total immersion as the mode of baptism. He also suggests that the early church conducted the baptismal rite outdoors in flowing water (cf. the epistle’s reference to a flowing river, “Καὶ ἦν ποταμὸς ἔλκων ἐκ δεξιῶν,” *Barn.* 11.10). Thus, the relevant evidence lends credence to the practice of immersion rather than infusion or aspersion, which would not necessarily demand the use of running water.⁹ Phillip Schaff confirms the latter point and states that the early church practiced baptism “on streams in the open air.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, theologians must use caution when speculating about the text’s authorial intent. Baptizing outside in flowing water was both accessible and free. Such ceremonies were optimal for a growing religious movement that was not yet conventional or state sponsored. At this point, both partial and total immersions were still possible since the text only identifies the petitioner’s presence in water. It does not describe whether the early church submerged the new convert’s entire body or only partially drenched it.

The Shepherd of Hermas (ca. AD 115-160)¹¹

The *Shepherd of Hermas* first mentions baptism by alluding to an open body of liquid, apparently ample enough for the catechumen “to roll into the water [κυλισθῆναι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ]” (*Herm. Vis.* 3.7.3).¹² The use of a large area to conduct baptisms also indicates that the ceremony took place outside. While outdoor baptisms are ideal for immersion practices, they do not necessarily require a total submersion of the candidate. In fact, the location of the ceremony must not be viewed as dictating any one particular mode of baptism. Rather, the use of public water supplies may simply indicate the resourcefulness of a fledgling and disadvantaged sect.

⁸ All Greek and English texts of *Barnabas* appear in Michael William Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2nd ed., trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 304-7.

⁹ Everett Ferguson, “Christian and Jewish Baptism According to the *Epistle of Barnabas*,” in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 221-22.

¹⁰ Philip Schaff, “§ 108. Baptisteries, Grave-Chapels, and Crypts,” in *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *The Middle Ages* (1910; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 558.

¹¹ Norman Geisler and William Nix state that the *Shepherd of Hermas* could be as early as AD 115 (Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Revised and Expanded [Chicago: Moody Press, 1996], 424). However, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Coxe believe it to be as late as AD 160 (Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “The Pastor of Hermas,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Second Century* [1885; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004], 3).

¹² All Greek and English texts of *Shepherd* appear in Holmes, 358-59, 382-83.

The most allusive feature in Hermas' work appears in his second book of *Mandates*, which reads, "There is no other repentance than that which takes place, when we descended into the water [ὅτε εἰς ὕδωρ κατέβημεν] and received remission of our former sins" (*Herm. Mand.* 4.3.1). The description of descending (καταβαίνω) into the water, similar to *Barnabas*, indicates immersion as the primary mode of baptism (cf. Hermas' description of ascending through water in order to be made alive, "εἶχον δὲ ὕδατος ἀναβῆναι, ἵνα ζωοποιηθῶσιν," *Herm. Sim.* 9.16.2). However, the terminology is ambiguous and can only eliminate aspersion and affusion as the prescribed mode of baptism.

The Didache (ca. AD 60-150)¹³

The *Didache* is the most important document regarding baptism in the subapostolic era because it gives a clearly defined outline concerning the procedures for baptism. It instructs Christians to baptize in running water (lit. "living water" [ὕδωρ ζῶν], *Did.* 7.1-2; cf. John 4:10), which at least confirms the practice of partial immersion. The text makes a distinction between immersion and affusion in the ensuing passage, "But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold [ψυχρῷ] water, then do so in warm [θερμῷ]. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times [ἐκχεσον εἰς τὴν κεφαλὴν τρίς ὕδωρ] 'in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit'" (*Did.* 7.2-3).¹⁴

The identification of cold liquid may reference outdoor locations, such as using the cold water from lakes and ponds. Ferguson notes that the imperative for triple pouring on the candidate's head could indicate the practice of submerging the body three times. If this is the case, then affusion may have been a substitute for submersion in an attempt to cover the entire body with water. Similarly, the allowance of perfusion (pouring water over the head) may have been to imitate the naturally flowing water commonly present in ideal outdoor locations.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the text of the *Didache* only indicates immersion in running water. It does not mention any specific acts of pouring or submerging with regards to the preferred method.

Nonetheless, the most noteworthy feature is the insignificance given to the mode of baptism. The *Didache* favors the catechumen's presence in water. However, if immersion was not possible, then infusion was acceptable, as well. William BeVier remarks, "The concept appears to be that any mode can be used, just so water is applied. The immersionists can well point out that their mode seems to have first choice....and indeed the very tone of the *Didache* seems to allow a great amount of freedom as to mode and amount of water used."¹⁶ Ferguson notes that this is not the only example of a permissible substitute.¹⁷ The only

¹³ Geisler and Nix date the *Didache* to the first half of the second century, between AD 120 and 150 (Geisler and Nix, 424). Michael Holmes, on the other hand, believes it to be as early as the latter half of the first century, AD 60-100 (Holmes, 247-48).

¹⁴ All Greek and English texts of the *Didache* appear in Holmes, 258-59.

¹⁵ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 203-5.

¹⁶ William A. BeVier, "Water Baptism in the Ancient Church Part I," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116, no. 462 (April 1959): 142.

¹⁷ Everett Ferguson, "Baptism from The Second to The Fourth Century," *Restoration Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1957): 186-88.

required practice was the triune confession of faith in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (7.1, 3).

The *Didache* also indicates the practicality of baptism in the early Christian church. It answers how Christians were to baptize in locations that lack access to an adequate water supply. It also indirectly addresses the issue of baptizing new converts in different seasons when rivers and lakes are frozen or when droughts have dried the streams. The early church appeared to be conscientious of the possibility of a deficiency in flowing water. The *Didache* allows for more practical methods, such as pouring liquid rather than require immersing someone in the wilderness. This conscious effort by the early church indicates that they were more concerned with the triune confession of faith than they were with the ritual itself.

Ante-Nicene Writings (AD 150-300)

The writings of the ante-Nicene era also demonstrate that the early church prioritized immersion as the favored mode of baptism. However, this period also tended to disregard the necessity of baptizing outside. The writings clearly define trine immersion (baptizing a petitioner three times) as a common mode of baptism, but most descriptions are not explicit whether baptism involved total or partial immersion. Some of the writings argue that affusion and aspersion are sufficient in the case of clinical baptisms, such as sickbed conversions and impending deaths. Interestingly, these writings also indicate that the mode of baptism was irrelevant to the early church.

*Justin Martyr (d. ca. AD 165)*¹⁸

Justin Martyr, in a short introduction to baptism in his *First Apology*, sought to “relate the manner in which we [Christians] dedicated ourselves to God” (1 *Apol.* 61.1).¹⁹ He mentioned that the baptismal candidates approached a large body of water, which likely confirms the use of outdoor baptisms.²⁰ Again, using wilderness locations was ideal for immersion practices and would not always be necessary for affusion or aspersion. The text continues to suggest immersion when Justin compared baptism to a total washing of the body, “Those who enter their temples ... they cause them also to wash themselves entirely [λούεσθαι]” (62.1).²¹ In this particular example, Justin described other religious practices that imitated the church’s baptismal rite. It is likely that Justin was acknowledging the mode of immersion. However, it is not certain whether he meant total submersion or partial immersion since both wash the entire body.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin may have alluded to submersion when he described the depraved state of the baptismal candidates as they are “plunged” or “dipped” (βεβαπτισμένους) in water. The use of this particular Greek inflection resembles the form used in other ancient texts, which describe a person being overwhelmed by various magical, physical, or mental influences. The verb’s base root (βάπτω) often signifies the total submersion of an object

¹⁸ James Eckman dates Justin Martyr’s execution to approximately AD 165 (James P. Eckman, *Exploring Church History* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002], 24-25).

¹⁹ All English translations of Justin Martyr’s work appear in Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, 183-84, 242.

²⁰ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 239.

²¹ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 1:184. All Greek texts of Justin Martyr’s work appear in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 241-43.

under water, similar to a ship sinking or a person drowning. However, the word is also applied to “dipping” only a part of the body in liquid (cf. Luke 16:24; John 13:26; Rev. 19:13).²²

Thus, Justin’s use of the word does not necessitate total submersion, but it is likely that the entire body is overwhelmed with water during the baptismal rite, “By purifying [us] with water, [Jesus] has redeemed us, though plunged [βεβαπτισμένους] in the direst offences which we have committed, and has made [us] a house of prayer and adoration” (*Dial.* 86.6).²³ Ferguson ascribes submersion to this statement and paraphrases it accordingly, “Those plunged in sins are now plunged in the water that purifies from sins.”²⁴ When connected to the pervasiveness of human depravity, being “plunged” in water likely references the practice of total submersion.

The Hippolytan Community (Third Century AD)

Recent examinations of the literary corpus generally attributed to the Roman presbyter Hippolytus (ca. AD 170-236) have cast doubt on whether he was the actual author of the so-called Hippolytan texts. Allen Brent suggests that several ancient writings, such as the *Apostolic Tradition*, may have originated from a Hippolytan community, which shared Hippolytus’ antagonistic beliefs in the late second and early third centuries.²⁵ In order to identify literary references to baptism, this research will treat the Hippolytan texts as a compilation of writings that eventually endured in a Roman community around the third century.²⁶

The *Apostolic Tradition* is the most detailed and comprehensive description of the early church’s catechesis.²⁷ Again, the text indicates the prevalence of running water when its author instructed liquid to flow into a baptismal pool. Ferguson notes that differing versions of the *Apostolic Tradition* give an exception to the type of water that can be used, “The Arabic and Ethiopic versions state that in the absence of water to flow into the place of baptism, any water that can be found is to be poured into the font” (*Trad. ap.* 21.1-2).²⁸ As before, the

²² See Albrecht Oepke, “βάπτω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 1:529-30.

²³ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 1:242.

²⁴ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 243.

²⁵ Allen Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), ch. 3.

²⁶ For a survey of the different perspectives, including supports and complications with the traditional assignments, see Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *On the Apostolic Tradition: An English Version with Introduction and Commentary*, Popular Patristics Series 22 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 49-50; Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 14; and John F. Baldovin “Hippolytus and the Apostolic Tradition: Recent Research and Commentary,” *Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (September 2003): 520-42.

²⁷ A “catechesis” is the instruction, preparation, and administration of baptism. See Geoffrey Wainwright, “Baptism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 1:186.

²⁸ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 330. Together with the Sahidic (S) version, the Arabic (A) and Ethiopic (E) texts state, “...utere aquam quam invenis (S) fundat aquam quam invenit (A) fundat aquam

flow of water into the pool can suggest both total and partial immersion. It is likely to indicate partial immersion if the stream was used to pour water on the petitioner's head. Of course, the flow of water may not have been used to drench the candidate at all and could have been for purely aesthetic or symbolic purposes.

The *Apostolic Tradition* further indicates immersion practices when describing the catechumen's presence in a pool of water:

Then, after these things, let him give him over to the presbyter who baptizes, and let the candidates stand in the water, naked, a deacon going with them likewise. *And when he who is being baptized goes down into the water (Cum ergo descendit qui baptizatur in aquam),* he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say thus: Dost thou believe in God, the Father Almighty? And he who is being baptized shall say: I believe. Then holding his hand placed on his head, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say: Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead? And when he says: I believe, he is baptized again. And again he shall say: Dost thou believe in [the] Holy Ghost, and the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh? He who is being baptized shall say accordingly: I believe, and so he is baptized a third time. *And afterward, when he has come up [out of the water] (Et postea cum ascenderit ex aqua),* he is anointed by the presbyter with the oil of thanksgiving, the presbyter saying: I anoint thee with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ. And so each one, after drying himself, is immediately clothed, and then is brought into the church. (*Trad. ap.* 21.11-20)²⁹

There are several striking points about this text. First, the document indicates the use of trine immersion, baptizing the catechumen after each confession of faith. Second, placing a hand on the head preceded the act of baptizing. Ferguson argues, "The hand on the head was functional in the immersions," meaning the baptizer used his hand to plunge the candidate's body under water.³⁰ Third, the text describes the act of entering a pool of water nude, ascending from the water, and the need to dry the body. Ferguson concludes that nudity, hands on the head, and the depiction of a significant amount of water is clear evidence for submersion.³¹

Despite these assertions, Ferguson's conclusion is not the only explanation. If the catechumen were partially submerged and had water poured over their head, then nudity would be preferred to drenching the candidate's clothes, and it would also require drying the

hauriendo eam (E)." For a critical examination of the *Apostolic Tradition* 21, see Dom Bernard Botte, *La tradition apostolique de saint Hippolyte: Essai de reconstitution* (Münster, Germany: Aschendorffsche, 1963), 44-59.

²⁹ The English translation appears in Burton Scott Easton, trans., *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus: Translated into English with Introduction and Notes* (1934; repr., Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1962), 46-47; brackets appear in the original with emphasis added to the English translation. The Latin text appears in the Testamentum Domini (T), Latin (L), and Bohairic (B) versions of the *Apostolic Tradition* (Botte, 48-51).

³⁰ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 331.

³¹ Ferguson, "Baptism from The Second to The Fourth Century," 197.

body. Likewise, the text indicates that the laying on of hands was part of the confession process. Hands on the head do not preclude the possibility of perfusion. The text simply does not state that the baptizer guided the person's head under water. It could also have alluded to the act of guiding someone's head under a fountain, since streams are mentioned in the preceding passage.

Finally, the text does not specify the amount of water in the baptismal font. It merely indicates the presence of liquid. Strikingly, the Hippolytan community references a small amount of water elsewhere. In *On the Holy Theophany*, the Hippolytan community described the irony of a small amount of water being used at Jesus' baptism, "How should the boundless River that makes glad the city of God have been dipped in a little water [ἐν ὀλίγῳ ὕδατι ἐλούετο]! The illimitable Spring that bears life to all men, and has no end, was covered by poor and temporary waters [πενιχρῶν καὶ πρόσκαιρων υδάτων ἐκαλύπτετο]" (*Serm. Theoph.* 2)!³²

The Hippolytan Community also provides another fascinating detail about Jesus' baptism that may expound on the ceremony. The community wrote, "He [Jesus] bent His head to be baptized by John [ἔκλινεν τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ βαπτισθῆναι ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου]" (*Serm. Theoph.* 4).³³ This text may suggest what Ferguson calls the "Dunkers' method," which involves the catechumen kneeling in water and bending forward to complete the submersion process.³⁴ He expressly rejects the idea that the ancient church practiced the same method of baptism as performed by "some modern religious groups of laying the person back horizontally."³⁵ In contrast to this theory, however, the text could just as easily be describing Christ's humility during His baptism. At this point, immersion is certain, but total submersion is still conjectural.

More significantly, however, the Hippolytan writings emphasize the faith and character of the catechumen rather than the mode of baptism. Prior to initiation, the church required that candidates provide witnesses to their good conduct (*Trad. ap.* 15), attend several years of instruction (17), and be subject to an examination of their virtuous living (20). Early Christians did not consider the catechumen as part of the church until evidence of their faith and character were assured prior to the act of baptism (18-19). Thus, the community was more interested in the transformation of the person than they were with ritualistic practices. This may also explain why the various writings are often ambiguous in their descriptions and terminology of the ceremony.

*Clement of Alexandria (b. ca. AD 150)*³⁶

Clement of Alexandria's writings describe baptism as a dipping process, which hints at immersion, "Let us quench the fiery darts of the evil one with the moistened sword-points, those that have been dipped in water by the Word [ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου βεβαμμέναις]" (*Protr.* XI).³⁷ He painted the clearest picture of immersion when duplicating Hermas' description of descending into (καταβαίνω) and ascending out of (ἀναβαίνω) the water, "They descended

³² The English translation appears in Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, eds., vol. 5, *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, 235. The Greek text appears in Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., "Sermo in sancta theophania," in *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca* (Paris: 1857), 10:853.

³³ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 5:235; Migne, 10:856.

³⁴ Ferguson, "Baptism from The Second to The Fourth Century," 197.

³⁵ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 850.

therefore into the water with them and again ascended (κατέβησαν οὖν μετ' αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ πάλιν ἀνέβησαν)" (*Strom.* 6.6; cf. *Herm. Sim.* 9.16.6).³⁸ Much like the other writings, however, either total or partial immersion can be seen as the preferred method. While the "dipping" terminology may suggest submersion, it is just as likely that Clement was referring to plunging only a part of the body when he compared the person to "moistened sword-points" rather than to a fully soaked sword (cf. Luke 16:24).

*Tertullian (ca. AD 196-212)*³⁹

Tertullian is the second most prolific writer regarding baptism in the ante-Nicene era. Tertullian expressed a lack of concern over where and how baptism took place, which suggests the early church was more concerned with practicality issues than ritualistic processes. He wrote, "Consequently it makes no matter whether one is washed in the sea or in a pond, a river or a fountain, a cistern or a tub [*ideoque nulla distinctio est mari quis an stagno, flumine an fonte, lacu an alveo diluatur*]....Therefore, in consequence of that ancient original privilege, all waters [*omnes aquae*], when God is invoked, acquire the sacred significance of conveying sanctity" (*Bapt.* 4).⁴⁰ By lending support for various locations, Tertullian may have accepted multiple modes of baptism. For instance, a "sea," "pond," and "river" are ideal for submersion. A "fountain" is useful in partial immersions, where candidates stand in the water and drench their heads. A "cistern" and a "tub" could be used for both affusion and aspersion practices, especially if candidates stood outside a trough and had water poured or splashed on them.

Tertullian also provides a fascinating description of the petitioners bending their knee in preparation for the baptismal ceremony, "Those who are at the point of entering upon baptism ought to pray, with frequent prayers, fastings, [and] bendings of the knee [*geniculationibus et pervigiliis*]" (*Bapt.* 20).⁴¹ Though the statement is possibly an allusion to prayer, it is striking that "bendings of the knee" is listed alongside "frequent prayers," which would make the phrase an odd tautological inference. Rather, bending down may suggest the practice of dunking a candidate's head under water (the "Dunkers' method") or kneeling before an altar.

Regardless, he does mention that immersion was the standard mode of baptism. "When we are going to enter [*adituri*; lit. approach, visit] the water, but a little before, in the presence

³⁶ T. E. Page et al. date Clement of Alexandria's birth to AD 150 and proscribe a late second century period to his teaching ministry (T. E. Page et al., eds., *Clement of Alexandria*, trans. George William Butterworth Loeb Classical Library [1919; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960], xi).

³⁷ The Greek and English texts appear in Page et al., 248-49.

³⁸ The English and Greek texts of *Stromateis* 6.6 appear in Schaff, "§ 168. Hermas," in *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, 685n1284; italics added to Schaff's Greek text.

³⁹ Christoph Marksches dates Tertullian's writing period to AD 196-212, (Christoph Marksches, "Tertullian" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008], 5:345).

⁴⁰ The English and Latin texts appear in Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism: The Text Edited with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1964), 10-11; emphasis added to the English translation.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

of the congregation and under the hand of the president [*sub antistitis manu*]...we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel [*Dehinc ter mergitatur amplius aliquid respondentes quam Dominus in Evangelio determinavit*]” (Cor. 3).⁴² Here, Tertullian stated that immersion (*mergitatur*; lit. dip, plunge, sink, drown, bury, overwhelm) occurred three times, though he acknowledged that this was not prescribed in the New Testament. He further states elsewhere, “And indeed it is not once only, but three times, that we are immersed into the Three Persons, at each several mention of Their names [*nam nec semel sed ter, ad singula nomina in personas singulas, tingimur*]” (Prax. 26).⁴³

In a separate text, Tertullian explicitly depicts baptism as a dipping or sinking motion, “Just as in the baptism itself there is an act that touches the flesh, that we are immersed [*mergimur*] in water, but a spiritual effect, that we are set free from sins [*quomodo et ipsius baptismi carnalis actus quod in aqua mergimur, spiritualis effectus quod delictis liberamur*]” (Bapt. 7).⁴⁴ Sinking has the potential of alluding to covering the body completely with water in one single motion. Tertullian also contrasts the practice of immersion to aspersion when he wrote, “For who will grant to you, a man of so faithless repentance, one single sprinkling of any water whatever [*Quis enim tibi tam infidae paenitentiae viro, asperginem unam cuiuslibet aquae commodabit?*]” (Paen. 6)?⁴⁵ Ferguson paraphrases Tertullian’s contention, “If you do not genuinely repent, no one will give you even a sprinkling, much less an immersion.”⁴⁶

Tertullian further states, “A man is sent down into the water [*homo in aqua demissus*], is washed to the accompaniment of very few words, and comes up little or no cleaner than he was [*non multo vel nihilo mundior resurgit*], his attainment to eternity is regarded as beyond belief” (Bapt. 2).⁴⁷ Tertullian views the baptismal process as scarcely cleaning the baptizee, possibly suggesting a deficient amount of water to properly bathe someone. However, the action of being lowered into the water (*demissus*; lit. drop, let fall, sink) likely suggests the act of submerging in liquid. What is certain is that some form of immersion, rather than sprinkling or pouring, is the preferred mode of baptism according to Tertullian.

Laurence Stookey comments that partial immersion, rather than total submersion, is still highly probable (i.e. the candidate “dips” his body into the water and is then covered with more liquid). The debate arises over specific baptismal terms (“dip,” “plunge,” etc.). As Stookey remarks, believing that certain terminology had only one meaning in Greek and Latin would be similar to saying “the Lord’s Supper” means only an evening meal in English.

⁴² The English translation appears in Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, eds., vol. 3, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, 94. The Latin text appears in George Currey, ed., *Tertulliani libri tres: de spectaculis, de idololatria et de corona militis: Three Treatises of Tertullian with English Notes, an Introduction and Indexes* (Cambridge: John W. Parker, 1854), 119-20.

⁴³ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 3:623. The Latin text appears in Ernest Evans, *Tertulliani Adversus Praxean Liber: Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas* (London: SPCK Publisher, 1948), 123.

⁴⁴ Evans, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, 16-17.

⁴⁵ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 3:661. The Latin text appears in Erwin Preuschen, *Tertullian: De paenitentia. De pudicitia*, Sammlung ausgewählter kirchen- und dogmengeschichtlicher quellschriften (Freiberg, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1891), 9.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 341.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, 4-5. Cf. the somewhat misleading translation by Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 3:669, “A man is *dipped* in water, and amid the utterance of some few words, is *sprinkled*, and then rises again;” emphasis added to the latter’s translation.

He writes, “If the word for baptism can mean nothing except [total] immersion, the references from Peter and Paul make no sense [in 1 Cor. 10:2; 1 Pet. 3:20-21; cf. Luke 11:38].”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Stookey’s desire to implement semantic domains to the terminology cannot adequately explain Tertullian’s ritual contrasts that try to avoid merely pouring or sprinkling water on the catechumen.

As far as who could perform the ceremony, Tertullian again favors one method but appears to ultimately view it as inconsequential, “Of giving it [baptism], the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons....Beside these, even laymen have the right; for what is equally received can be equally given” (*Bapt.* 17).⁴⁹ Tertullian required that baptism be performed with the authority of the church but, like his view on where and how, was not overly dogmatic. He even viewed the time of baptism as irrelevant, “However, *every* day is the Lord’s; every hour, every time, is apt for baptism” (*ibid.*).⁵⁰ If Tertullian was unconcerned about who conducted baptism and when and where it took place, then perhaps he was equally unconcerned about the method, as well. This is especially evident when he acknowledges trine immersion as unscriptural yet still an acceptable practice (*Cor.* 3).

*Cyprian (ca. AD 256)*⁵¹

Cyprian wrote his later letters in reaction to the controversy of rebaptizing former Christian schismatics who once followed a rival presbyter named Novatian. In his writings, he referenced the baptismal procedures of this heretical movement as a dipping method, “They who have been dipped [*tincti*; lit. dip, soak] by heretics ought not to be baptized when they come to us” (*Ep.* 70.1).⁵² Cyprian hints that the heretical groups utilized the same baptismal procedures as the official church (cf. *Ep.* 75.7). Once again, being “dipped” easily indicates immersion of the candidate. As before, however, the terminology can indicate both submersion and partial immersion of the body since “dipped” requires only that the catechumen be present in water.

Cyprian confirms the practice of immersion when he identifies a difference between standard baptism and the practice of clinical baptism, which was conducted by affusion or aspersion. “Nor ought it to trouble any one that sick people seem to be sprinkled [*aspargi*; lit. splatter, splash] or affused [*perfundi*; lit. pour over, bathe], when they obtain the Lord’s grace” (*Ep.* 75.12).⁵³ Cyprian systematically defended affusion and aspersion in his letter and

⁴⁸ Laurence Hull Stookey, “Baptism,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 148.

⁴⁹ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 3:677.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:678; italics in original.

⁵¹ Francine Cardman dates Cyprian’s letters (#69-75) to after the council meetings at Carthage in AD 256 (Francine Cardman, “Cyprian of Carthage,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999], 1:764).

⁵² Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 5:377. Cyprian used the Latin *tinguo* and *tinctio* exclusively for heretical baptisms (see Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 353n15).

⁵³ Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, 5:401; cf. *Ep.* 75.13-16. The Latin text appears in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 355.

asserted that all modes of baptism have the same meaning. Although he allows for sickbed baptisms, immersion was still the preferred mode in routine circumstances. Ferguson comments, “The objectors to sickbed baptism addressed in this passage based their concerns on its being administered by pouring (or sprinkling) rather than being a complete washing.”⁵⁴ For Cyprian, it did not matter the amount of water used in baptism since he believed that the Holy Spirit was poured without limits (*Ep.* 75.13-14; cf. John 3:34). BeVier comments, “[Cyprian] made mode a matter of minor importance, provided faith was present in the recipient and ministrant.”⁵⁵ In the end, Cyprian’s writings demonstrate that the early church was sensitive to practical issues involving the infirm and handicap. Adhering to a particular mode of baptism was not the early church’s primary focus.

Conclusions Regarding the Ancient Writings

Of the three subapostolic writings included in this report, all three testify that baptism took place outside in running water. This is most ideal for immersion practices and may indicate the candidate’s presence in a body of water. *Barnabas* and *Hermas* both describe the catechumen descending into and ascending out of water while the *Didache* distinguishes between being in the water and having water poured over the head. Though immersion is recognized, all three allow for the possibility of total or partial immersion as the primary mode.

There were five authors in the ante-Nicene period that describe the mode of baptism. Two describe the presence of flowing water but only one (Tertullian) explicitly describes an outside scene. At this point in church history, baptism has generally moved indoors. Again, all five indicate at least partial immersion as the primary method, but the terminology and context strongly hint at submersion. In all five writings, the practice of baptism may have involved either total or partial immersion.

Two collections of writings (the Hippolytan community and Tertullian) may allude to Ferguson’s “Dunkers’ method,” which expected the catechumen to kneel or bend forward in order to be completely submerged in water. Ferguson uses this theory to account for most of the ancient church’s baptismal ceremonies and even extends his theory to the use of baptisteries later in church history. While admitting that many of the baptismal fonts are too small for a horizontal submersion, Ferguson rationalizes his theory by explaining that outdoor water sources and baptismal fonts are too large to be used solely for pouring water. He writes, “If the baptizand was seated on the interior ledge, was in a kneeling or squatting position, or leaned forward from the waist there was ample space for [a total] immersion.”⁵⁶

Unfortunately, there are several practical issues with the “Dunkers’ method” that may have diminished its usefulness within the ancient church. To name the most obvious, there is no guarantee that the water in either the outdoor locations or the baptisteries was at a tolerable height for the type of dunking required by Ferguson’s theory. The prospect that ancient baptisteries were filled to the brim with water is unlikely. Rather, the earliest baptisteries may have had only one or two feet of liquid, which would have just barely

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 356.

⁵⁵ William A. BeVier, “Water Baptism in the First Five Centuries Part II: Modes of Water Baptism in the Ancient Church,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116, no. 463 (July 1959): 237.

⁵⁶ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 441.

surpassed the knees of an average person.⁵⁷ The impracticality of Ferguson's theory is especially true when considering the elderly, the infirm, and the handicapped, all of whom would have a difficult time bending or kneeling in running water, shallow water, or a confined space within the baptismal font.⁵⁸

Regardless of the potential for submersion, the use of outdoor locations and baptisteries were especially ideal for performing multiple baptisms at the same time. Modern practitioners must recognize that the ancient church did not always baptize single individuals, as is the custom today. It is just as likely that the different baptismal locations were chosen to accommodate simultaneous baptisms of several people. BeVier remarks that because Christianity grew so rapidly and churches conducted baptisms only three or four times a year, "Sometimes hundreds or thousands of converts were baptized at a time" (cf. Tertullian, *Bapt.*, 19).⁵⁹ Thus, churches could use one large location to partially immerse several converts simultaneously by perfusion in order to meet the needs of the number of people being baptized.

Nonetheless, the most significant aspect in these writings is the lack of a dogmatic adherence to one particular method. Rather than stress the mode of baptism, they stress the faith and character of the baptizand. While they prefer the catechumen to be present in a pool of water, they also allow for perfusion and infusion in less idyllic circumstances. The *Didache* contends that affusion practices are allowable in less than ideal settings. The Arabic and Ethiopic texts of the *Apostolic Tradition* suggest that the type of water used in baptism was unimportant. Tertullian remarks that it did not matter when, where, or who performed the baptism. He even acknowledges the lack of scriptural support for trine immersion, thereby giving precedence to varying methodologies. Finally, Cyprian argues that the amount of water was unimportant and defended immersion, affusion, and aspersion. Carpenter's study on the formula creeds used during baptismal practices leads him to believe that before the fourth century, there was no established practice for baptism. He concludes, "No writer down to and including Tertullian can be quoted as showing exclusive attachment to one structural form of summary, much less to one exact formula."⁶⁰ As BeVier remarks, "No

⁵⁷ See C. F. Rogers, "Baptism and Christian Archaeology," in *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica: Essays Chiefly in Biblical and Patristic Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 5:351. Rogers astutely states concerning one baptistery, contra Ferguson, that the seat ledge may actually demonstrate a shallower water depth, "[The water] was clearly therefore never more than half full, as no one would sit on a seat more than a few inches under the water" (Ibid., 5:350).

⁵⁸ The earliest known baptistery is located in the church building at Dura Europos. Clark Hopkins ascribes a date between AD 232 and 256 to this baptismal font (Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, ed. Bernard Goldman [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979], 94-96). According to Carl Kraeling, the baptistery is over three feet in depth and over three feet in length. He states that the candidates were clearly meant to enter the font but maintains that the baptistery is not deep enough for a total immersion (Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, ed. C. Bradford Welles [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967], 26-27, 145, 148).

⁵⁹ BeVier, "Water Baptism in the First Five Centuries Part 11," 235. Ferguson also admits that the early church's propensity to diminish the size of baptismal fonts was in large part due to the declining tradition of baptizing a large number of candidates at once (Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 849).

⁶⁰ Carpenter, 11:367-77.

uniformity as to mode of water baptism was evident in professing Christendom from the earliest centuries onward.”⁶¹

Application of the Evidence

BeVier makes another studious observation, “[Scholars] seem to give the truth, but never the whole truth, and, therefore very few give testimony to more than one view in respect to mode. Each has his own belief and presents evidence only in favor of that one.”⁶² Since the writings do not explicitly demand one mode of baptism, there is reason to believe that the method was inconsequential to ancient Christians. The evidence suggests that this ambiguity is because the exact type of baptism was not the early church’s primary concern.

In the end, both forms of immersion were practical but not required. Thus, contemporary practitioners can acknowledge one mode of baptism as their preferred method but should not dogmatically disregard the practical aspects of baptizing under less ideal circumstances. There may be cultural, geographical, physiological, or clinical reasons to forego the preferred method and to adapt to the needs of those being baptized. This is especially true in parts of the world where the church does not have access to a sufficient supply of clean water or where health concerns would prevent using water entirely (e.g. new converts who suffer from aquagenic urticarial, aquagenic pruritus, or aquadynia). As G. W. Bromiley contends, “The type of water and circumstances of administration are not important, though it seems necessary that there should be a preaching and confession of Christ as integral parts....Other ceremonies may be used at discretion so long as they are not unscriptural and do not distract from the true action.”⁶³

⁶¹ BeVier, “Water Baptism in the Ancient Church Part I,” 144.

⁶² Ibid., 137.

⁶³ G. W. Bromiley, “Baptism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 129.



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